IJNRD.ORG ISSN : 2456-4184
INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF NOVEL RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT (IJNRD) | IJNRD.ORG
An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Role of Emotional Intelligence and Social Support in Mitigating Academic Stress among Students.

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ABSTRACT

Academic stress is particularly prominent among adolescents, driven by the pressure to excel academically and meet the expectations of parents, often resulting in psychological distress. Emotional intelligence refers to the ability to recognize and manage emotions, which can aid in effectively navigating daily stressors and achieving positive outcomes. Social support, encompassing both emotional and physical comfort from family and friends, fosters a sense of belonging and well-being. This study investigates gender differences in academic stress, emotional intelligence, and social support among adolescent students. The sample consists of 200 senior secondary students from Mahatma Gandhi Mission University, Maharashtra, with 100 students from the Science stream and 100 from the Commerce stream. Data analysis was conducted using mean, standard deviation, and ANOVA. The findings reveal significant differences in academic stress, emotional intelligence, and social support between students from the Science and Commerce streams.

Keywords: Academic Stress, Emotional Intelligence, Social Support, Adolescents.

ACADEMIC STRESS – Stress is a universal experience, and it has undoubtedly become an integral part of human life. While a moderate amount of stress can contribute to an individual's well-being, excessive stress can disrupt healthy functioning (Schneiderman et al., 2004). Academic stress, in particular, places unique psychological pressure on students, arising from expectations set by parents, teachers, and themselves. The pursuit of unrealistic goals and the pressure to perform well often lead to mental distress, which may result in frustration, academic setbacks, or the fear of failure (Gupta and Khan, 1987). Adolescents frequently assess their self-worth based on their test results, grades, and overall academic performance (Ang and Huan, 2006).

Stressors are factors that disrupt daily functioning, as they are perceived as threatening or harmful (Bernstein et al., 2008). These stressors can upset both the physical and psychological equilibrium of individuals, thereby affecting their overall well-being (Lazarus and Cohen, 1977). One significant stressor among adolescents is the pressure of setting high personal expectations, which leads to academic stress (Berg and Keinan, 1986). Adolescents also face considerable stress due to academic demands such as assignments, presentations, and exams, which contribute to elevated levels of academic stress (Shirom, 1986).

The education system plays a significant role in exacerbating academic stress. Factors such as the structure of the curriculum, high student-to-teacher ratios, teaching methods that emphasize theoretical knowledge over practical applications, and limited student-teacher interactions all contribute to increasing academic stress and performance anxiety (Masih and Gulrez, 2006). A study by Menaga and Chandrasekaran (2014) highlighted that academic stress levels among adolescents vary based on factors like age, gender, school type, and family environment. Additionally, research by Anice James and Marie (2004) examined the impact of academic stress on the academic performance of Class XI students, revealing that girls tend to achieve higher academic success and experience lower levels of academic stress compared to their male peers.

EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE – Emotional intelligence (EI) has its origins in the concept of social intelligence. The term was initially introduced by Mayer and Salovey in 1989, describing it as the ability to

recognize and understand one's own emotions and those of others. Goleman (1995) further popularized the term in his book *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ*. EI is understood as the connection between attention and cognition (Mayer, Roberts, and Barsade, 2008).

Emotional intelligence can be defined as the capacity to process emotional information, which includes the perception, assimilation, understanding, and regulation of emotions (Mayer and Cobb, 2000). EI plays a vital role in an individual's overall well-being and helps navigate the complexities of life. It allows individuals to recognize and relate to their emotions, enabling them to tackle challenging situations. Even students with high academic performance are not immune to emotional turmoil. Emotional literacy is crucial because suppressed emotions can lead to issues such as troubled relationships, depression, and negatively affect physical and mental health (Goleman, 1994).

Goleman (1995) identified five key components of emotional intelligence: Self-Awareness, Self-Regulation, Motivation, Empathy, and Social Skills. He further expanded on this in 1998, referring to EI as "Emotional Competencies" and suggesting that understanding and learning from emotions is essential for outstanding performance.

Emotional intelligence is also linked to an individual's ability to cope with stress. When facing stressful situations and struggling to meet goals, effective coping strategies are necessary to create a balance between internal and external factors. This involves assessing the situation properly and adjusting goals and expectations as needed, rather than rigidly sticking to original aspirations (Albesher and Alsaeed, 2015). Emotionally intelligent individuals tend to be more adaptable to change, experience higher levels of happiness and health, and often perform better than others (Epstein, 1998).

A study by James D.A. Parker, Ronald E. Creque Sr., and David L. (2004) involving 667 high school students examined the relationship between emotional intelligence and academic achievement. The results showed a strong connection between EI and academic performance, highlighting the impact of emotional intelligence on student outcomes. Additionally, Mishra and Ranjan (2008) explored the influence of emotional intelligence on gender differences among adolescents, finding that males tend to be more emotionally secure, excelling in interpersonal and intrapersonal skills, better stress management, and exhibiting higher levels of happiness and optimism compared to females.

SOCIAL SUPPORT – Social support refers to an individual's perception of the assistance they can receive from others. This support can take various forms, including emotional, informational, companionship, and both tangible and intangible forms. The National Cancer Institute defines social support as the network of family and friends who provide psychological, physical, and financial help during times of need. The theoretical model of social support outlines two key dimensions: Structural Support (which includes factors like the size and frequency of one's social network) and Functional Support (which refers to the specific types of support, such as emotional, informational, or companionship, provided by that network) (Charney and D.S, 2004).

The amount and type of social support an individual receives is influenced by their developmental stage. For early adolescents, parental support is particularly important, while late adolescents may rely more on peer support (Stice, Ragan, and Randall, 2004). For older adults, social interactions are key to their perception of support, whereas younger individuals often benefit more from instrumental support (Lynch et al., 1999). Social support has a positive impact on both mental and physical health, as individuals with strong social support are less likely to engage in risky behaviors (Rozanski and Kaplan, 1999) and are better able to manage negative situations (Fontana, Kens, and Rosenberg, 1989).

Jones (2012) conducted a cross-sectional study exploring the relationship between physical health, mental health, and social support among students. The study found a positive correlation between physical health and social support, with students' mental health also being positively influenced by the quality of social support they received. Ryan et al. (2009) discovered that students reported high levels of social support from both their parents and peers on campus. Additionally, Ryan found that adolescents are increasingly seeking social support online, joining various groups and communities for this purpose. Adolescents with less parental support are more likely to seek out social connections and support through online platforms. Sadaf (2011) identified a positive correlation between family environment and academic achievement, with study habits also being significantly related to academic performance. Furthermore, the study found that science students generally perform better academically compared to their peers in the arts. Rais (2011) examined the influence of parental encouragement on academic performance and found that female adolescents received more encouragement and support than males, which in turn influenced their academic outcomes.

OBJECTIVE- The aim of this study is to assess and compare academic stress, emotional intelligence, and social support among male and female adolescents from the Science and Commerce streams.

HYPOTHESES OF THE STUDY

(Ha_1) There will be significant differences in academic stress between male and female students across both the Science and Commerce streams.

(Ha_2) There will be significant differences in emotional intelligence between male and female students across both the Science and Commerce streams.

(Ha_3) There will be significant differences in social support between male and female students across both the Science and Commerce streams.

METHODOLOGY

Participants – Participants for this study were selected using a simple random sampling method. Data was collected from four senior secondary schools located near the Mahatma Gandhi Mission University, Maharashtra. A total of 200 participants were included in the study, with 100 students from the Science stream and 100 from the Commerce stream. The purpose of the study was explained to the participants, and their informed consent was obtained. Upon completing the questionnaire, the participants were thanked for their cooperation and participation.

Instruments

1. **Academic Stress Scale** – Developed by Akram, Khan, and Baby in 2013, this scale comprises 36 items and utilizes a four-point response system. The scale ranges from 1 (no stress) to 4 (extreme stress), with scores reflecting the level of academic stress experienced by participants. The total score can range from 36 to 114, with higher scores indicating greater academic stress and lower scores indicating lesser stress. The construct validity of the scale ranges between 0.41 and 0.88.

2. **Emotional Intelligence Scale** – Created by Singh in 2004, this scale consists of 59 items across five subscales that assess self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, social awareness, and social skills. Each item is rated on a five-point scale, with the highest possible score being 259 and the lowest 59. A higher score indicates a higher level of emotional intelligence, while a lower score suggests a lower level. The reliability of the scale was reported to be 0.70.

3. **Social Support Scale** – Developed by Cohen et al. in 1985, this scale contains 15 items and uses a four-point response system. The scores range from 1 (completely false) to 4 (completely true), with the total score ranging from 1 to 60. A higher score indicates a greater degree of social support, while a lower score suggests less support. The test-retest reliability of the scale ranges from 0.77 to 0.90.

Statistical Analysis: Descriptive statistics, including the mean, standard deviation, and standard error of the mean, were employed to evaluate the levels of academic stress, emotional intelligence, and social support. To assess the significance of differences between groups, ANOVA was conducted for each variable (academic stress, emotional intelligence, and social support). Gender differences were also examined for all these variables, with comparisons made between male and female participants to determine if there were any significant differences across these measures.

RESULTS

Table 4.1(a) – Showing the mean, standard deviation, and F-value for male and female students in both the Commerce (Comm.) and Science (Sci.) streams, in relation to their academic stress levels.

Variable	Groups	N	Mean	SD	ST.E	F	P
ACADEMIC STRESS	Comm. Males	50	76.62	25.69	3.63	9.135**	.000
	Sci. Males	50	96.12	14.70	2.07		
	Comm. Females	50	85.56	20.23	2.86		
	Sci. Females	50	90.98	14.39	2.03		

****P< .01**

Table 4.1(a) presents a comparison between male and female students in the Commerce and Science streams regarding their academic stress levels. The F-value was found to be 9.135**, which is statistically significant at the 0.01 level. This indicates that there are significant differences in academic stress between male and female students across both streams. Looking at the mean scores, it is evident that male students from the Science stream have higher mean scores, suggesting they experience a higher level of academic stress. A similar pattern in mean scores is observed among female students across both streams, indicating that females in the Commerce and Science streams report slightly lower academic stress compared to their male counterparts in the Science stream. Lastly, male students in the Commerce stream show a decreasing trend in mean scores, implying they experience a lower level of academic stress.

Table 4.1(b) presents the results of the post hoc comparison (Tukey's HSD) between male and female students in the Commerce and Science streams.

Variable	Group	Mean Difference	P
ACADEMIC STRESS	Comm Males Vs Comm Females	-11.94	P< .05
	Sci Males Vs Sci Females	5.14	P> .05

***P< .05**

Table 4.1(b) illustrates the mean differences in academic stress between male and female students from the Commerce and Science streams. It is evident that a significant mean difference exists between male and female students in the Commerce stream, while no significant difference is observed between male and female students in the Science stream. The Tukey's HSD test further supports the results presented in **Table 4.1(a)**.

Table 4.2(a) Presents the mean, standard deviation, and F-value for male and female students in both the Commerce and Science streams concerning their emotional intelligence.

Variable	Group	N	Mean	SD	ST.E	F	P
EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE	Comm. Males	50	220.78	36.23	5.12	6.985**	.000
	Sci. Males	50	190.30	21.82	3.08		
	Comm. Females	50	196.14	42.56	6.01		
	Sci. Females	50	197.18	39.88	5.64		

**p< .01

Table 4.2(a) presents a comparison between male and female students from both the Commerce and Science streams in terms of their emotional intelligence. The F-value of 6.985** is statistically significant at the 0.01 level. It is evident that all four student groups (Commerce and Science streams, male and female) differ significantly in their emotional intelligence. When examining the mean scores, it is clear that male students from the Commerce stream have the highest scores, indicating a higher level of emotional intelligence. A similar pattern is observed in the male students from the Science stream and female students from both the Commerce and Science streams, who also exhibit relatively high emotional intelligence, though at a lower level than their male counterparts in the Commerce stream.

Table 4.2(b) Shows the post hoc comparison (Tukey's HSD) between male and female students in the Commerce and Science streams.

Variable	Group	Mean Difference	P
EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE	Comm Males Vs Comm Females	24.64	P<.05
	Sci Males Vs Sci Females	-6.88	P>.05

*p< .05

Table 4.2(b) presents the mean differences in emotional intelligence between male and female students from both the Commerce and Science streams. A significant mean difference was observed between male and female students in the Commerce stream, while no significant difference was found between male and female students in the Science stream. The Tukey's HSD test further supports the findings presented in **Table 4.2(a)**.

Table 4.3(a) Shows the mean, standard deviation, and F-value for male and female students in both the Commerce and Science streams concerning their social support.

Variable	Group	N	Mean	SD	ST.E	F	P
SOCIAL SUPPORT	Comm. Males	50	39.80	5.33	.754	3.086**	.028
	Sci. Males	50	40.92	4.61	.652		
	Comm. Females	50	37.40	7.82	1.10		
	Sci. Females	50	39.69	5.47	.807		

*p< .05

Table 4.3(a) Shows a comparison between male and female students from both the Commerce and Science streams regarding their level of social support. The F-value was found to be 3.086**, which is significant at the 0.05 level. This indicates that significant differences exist between male and female students in both the Commerce and Science streams. When examining the mean scores for social support, it is evident that all groups show an upward trend in their scores. This suggests that all groups are receiving better support from significant people in their social environment. However, the groups differ significantly in the level of social support they receive.

Table 4.3(b) Shows the post hoc analysis (Tukey's HSD) comparing male and female students in the Commerce and Science streams.

Variable	Group	Mean Difference	P
SOCIAL SUPPORT	Comm Males Vs Comm Females	2.40	P> .05
	Sci Males Vs Sci Females	1.22	P> .05

*p< .05

Table 4.3(b) Shows the mean differences between male and female students in the Commerce and Science streams. According to the Tukey's HSD test, the comparisons revealed no significant differences, indicating that there is no substantial variation in the level of social support received by these students.

DISCUSSION

(Ha1) – This hypothesis predicted differences between male and female students (both from Commerce and Science streams) regarding academic stress. The hypothesis was confirmed as significant differences were observed between male and female students in both streams concerning their academic stress levels. Academic stress stems from both personal and external expectations, leading to discomfort and pressure (Ang and Huan, 2006; Wong et al., 2005). Science students, both male and female, experience higher levels of stress related to academic performance compared to their counterparts in the Commerce stream. This is likely due to the higher academic goals set by science students, which bring additional pressure and anxiety. However, there were not significant gender differences in academic stress levels, with both male and female students from each stream equally vulnerable to stress due to a lack of experience, skills, and knowledge.

(Ha2) – This hypothesis suggested that male and female students (both from Commerce and Science streams) would differ in emotional intelligence. The findings supported this hypothesis, revealing significant differences in

emotional intelligence between male and female students in both streams. Males in the Commerce stream showed slightly higher levels of emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence has been linked to academic success (Abdullah, 2006), as adolescents who can effectively manage their emotions are better equipped to handle academic stress, contributing to career success and personal growth (Abraham, 2006). Adolescents with lower emotional intelligence may struggle with conflict, fail to manage work-life balance, and experience heightened academic stress (Ayoko et al., 2008).

(Ha3) – This hypothesis examined whether there were differences between male and female students (in both Commerce and Science streams) in terms of social support. The findings supported this hypothesis, revealing significant differences between male and female students in both streams. However, the results also indicated no substantial gender difference in the level of social support received by students in either stream. Both male and female students receive comparable social support from their environment. Previous research has shown that supportive relationships with family, teachers, and peers positively affect academic performance and help individuals manage daily stressors by maintaining emotional balance (Goodenow, 1993; Levitt et al., 1994; Wentzel, 1998). Furthermore, an individual's social relationships play a crucial role in their performance, and those who experience strong social support tend to have higher levels of happiness, enjoy life more, and manage anxiety and stress more effectively (Baumeister and Leary, 1995).

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